Strange and Familiar Beauty
Barry Schwabsky

Let's agree, just tentatively, just for the moment, to call Eva Nielsen a landscape painter.[1] Yet her work is painting in a different sense than the one that has been handed down to us by tradition, and likewise the landscape as it appears there is something distinct from the inherited idea of it. Part of the pleasure imparted by her paintings comes from the way they put the viewer in a state of uncertainty, a sort of cognitive drift, and one of the causes of this uncertainty, though not the only one, is the both/and/neither/nor nature of the works' technical and material basis.

In the modernist tradition, Nielsen eschews any effort to minimize the noise-to-signal ratio in the transmission of an image, that is, to make communicative medium as transparent as possible to its pictorial content. In fact, she is just as interested in what, in the very means by which an image is constituted, interferes with the clear perception of it. One might even perceive the interference more readily than the image. But in any case, one is left with uncertainty: not only an uncertainty about what is being seen but also an uncertainty about what is causing that uncertainty. That's where the interchange between different techniques (photography, printing, painting) and materials (canvas as a support for oil, acrylic, and silkscreen ink, or paper as a support for ink, toner, and watercolor—not to mention those works in which leather substitutes for canvas or printed silk organza functions as a translucent layer of "paint" atop the surface) comes into play as an experiential factor in the work.

The artist herself has articulated the program: "Doubt, both mental and technical, is in my view the strongest way to allow the spectator to appreciate the work. A painting opens a space of projection, of fantasy…. Our vision of what surrounds us is by definition fragmentary and not to be trusted."[2] This realization—that not only representation, but what we think of as reality, are incomplete and inconsistent constructs—is certainly disquieting. But in painting, at least since Cubism and certainly once again in Nielsen's work, this disquiet can be made into a source of gratification. It can be savored, and in the process, we can learn, as it were, how to be at home in our human situation. As Nielsen says, "the viewer cannot really situate these spaces and is in a form of dream-like turmoil when faced with the paintings. It can evoke familiar places but there remains a part of doubt. This doubt is constitutive of my work."[3] This familiar yet dubious place is what the Freudians used to call the *Unheimlich*, the uncanny. Some of us are drawn to it like moths to a lamp.

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[1] To call Nielsen a landscape painter functions as, among other things, a note to myself, marking a certain regret: I wish I had known her art when I was working on the book *Landscape Painting Now: From Pop Abstraction to New Romanticusm* (New York: D.A.P., 2019), where she should have been included. But readers of it may recognize some of its themes recurring, transformed, in this essay.
[2] Léa Chauvel-Lévy, "An interview with Eva Nielsen," tr. by Joshua L. Sigal, in *Chroma: Eva Nielsen*, edited by Léa Chauvel-Lévy (Paris: RVB Books, 2021), unpaginated.
[3] Elisa Carollo, "Eva Nielsen: When Art Interacts with LMVH Artisanal Excellences," *Art She Says*, https://artshesays.com/eva-nielsen-when-art-interacts-with-lmvh-artisanal-excellences/.

Modernist practice can be said to begin with Édouard Manet interfering with his contemporaries' perception of his paintings' subjects by making a point of oil paint and canvas as matter and of the brush mark as a trace of the painter's manual effort as well as his in-the-moment decision-making, and this has sometimes been seen as heralding the arrival of abstraction, an art in which the image has disappeared, or rather, been reduced to that of the artist's representational means—Manet's dissonance pointing, paradoxically, toward a new kind of unison: "Since resemblance to nature is at best superfluous and at worst distracting," it was believed, "it might as well be eliminated."[4] Nielsen, by contrast, demands the persistence of the image. But her estrangement of the image—which precisely because it is the thing to be estranged remains fundamental to all her work—is achieved by mixing means and, as it were, impeding their distinct perception rather than (like Manet) isolating and highlighting them.

Even referring just to her use of screen printing alone, Nielsen emphasizes the multiplicity of its possibilities—one might even say, of its identities: "It is at once an imprint, a stencil, a photographic extract." Her adoption of it is tied directly to an experience of nature as artifice, as form, for as she has said, "My discovery of this technique is also connected to a feeling that I had one day whilst walking: the road, the building, the sky seemed to me particularly flat, as if they'd been cut out. I had a sense of vertiginous flatness. I was suddenly able to explore that feeling through screen-printing, because I could cut around the architectural elements, flatten their volume in the landscape and confront them at the vanishing line."[5]

This evocation of flatness signifies, of course, a connection to the whole history of modernism, of formalism, and indeed of the abstraction from which she has nonetheless turned away. Nielsen has even invoked Maurice Denis's famous dictum—this is noteworthy, among other reasons, because it seems so unfashionable at a moment when figurative painting with a blatant sociocultural message has become popular again—that a painting "is essentially a flat surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order."[6] At the same time, the idea of cutting evokes modernist practices of collage and photomontage. Screen-printing is thus, for Nielsen, a method for seeing the surrounding world in terms that are immediately those of art.

And yet, perhaps just because of their photographic origin, these printed images enter painting as strangers, as elements coming from some *elsewhere*. I think this displacement of the image accounts, in great part, for the feeling described by Marianne Derrien, and which I have strongly felt myself as well, that standing "before a Nielsen canvas, I often have the feeling of being both there—in front of the painting—and somewhere else—an elsewhere brought to life by the painting."[7] I am there and I am not there because what I see is there and not there.

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[4] Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Cubism and Abstract Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1936), p. 13.
[5] "Interview, March 2019, Joël Riff," tr. by Emily Grace Randall, in *Eva Nielsen* (Paris: Manuella Éditions, 2019), p. 177.
[6] Chauvel-Lévy, "An interview with Eva Nielsen," in *Chroma: Eva Nielsen*.
[7] Marianne Derrien, "Painterly Pastoral: A Path Connecting Sources," tr. by Joshua L. Sigal, in *Chroma*.

The image in Nielsen's paintings, you might say, is not, in essence, painted. And the act of painting rarely displays itself emphatically: most often, color appears as a mélange of fluid seepages that remain intangible, almost as if it were the result of a process of chemical interaction. And the artist acknowledges this: "I also play with the different techniques so that you can't really understand or know how the painting came about. Sometimes I'll screen print first and then paint layer after layer over the screen print by a masking system. Sometimes I will take and then screen print successive fragments to alter the first image. What interests me the most is the question of alchemy and the porosity or otherwise of materials."[8] Nielsen's layerings change the space of collage from surface to depth.

In this process, the gesture of the hand has not been eliminated but neither is it highlighted—it is not put on display for its own sake. Paint does not support the image but accompanies it and, sometimes, threatens to overwhelm it. There's nothing new about images entering the field of painting not through the action of the brush but as a silkscreened photograph, of course—the practice goes back to the early 1960s, to Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg. But to mention those names is already to evoke Nielsen's difference from them. A great distance separates her art from Pop. Warhol and Rauschenberg were fascinated by media images. The Rauschenberg Foundation website notes that for his 1962-64 silkscreen paintings, "Rauschenberg's image sources included *National Geographic*, *Life*, *Esquire*, *Boxing and Wrestling*, and newspapers, as well as his own photographs."[9] Warhol's early paintings of movie stars were made from publicity photos. Both artists liked to dwell on cultural icons: We immediately associate Warhol with his reiterated images of Marilyn Monroe or Elizabeth Taylor, but don't forget that while Rauschenberg usually puts the accent on the field rather than on the figure, the recurrent image in his silkscreen paintings is that of John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

The photographs Nielsen uses as sources, on the other hand, are mainly her own. If you've seen one of them before, you've probably seen it in a different painting of hers. It doesn't come with a culturally designated significance. And yet often, as with media images, the realm from which Nielsen's imagery comes somehow seems related more to a collective memory, even though it is impossible to explain why or say where they came from, than to individual experience. Sometimes it feels as if they might be frames from a film. The stillness of the image is eerie; there is a sense of something about to happen. The isolated cabin or bungalow that appears in several of the works, notably from the "*Chemical Milling*" series—isn't this the kind of place that, in some thriller, might serve as the hideout for some criminal trying to evade the law or maybe the gang he's betrayed? Maybe the place is uninhabited, abandoned, but to open the door to find out could mean danger. Or on the contrary, these might be family snapshots—but whose family? Everyone's No one's? Moreover, the vacancy of the landscape, as the artist herself has said, "opens up a temporal gap. There's no knowing if this is yesterday, today, or tomorrow. In my view, breaking the reference points is part of the power of painting. It's what allows the beholders to project themselves into it. People often tell me, 'It feels like the place where I grew up.' It's always an illusion but the void allows for this relationship with memory."[10]

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[8] Carollo, "Eva Nielsen."

[9] "Silkscreen Paintings (1962-64)," Robert Rauschenberg Foundation website, https://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/art/galleries/series/silkscreen-paintings-1962-64.

[10] Jeanne Etelan, "Entretien avec Eva Nielsen," *Art Critique* (August 1, 2022), https://www.art-critique.com/2022/08/entretien-avec-eva-nielsen/, my translation.

But while the paintings allow such resonances, they don't pursue them. No narrative ensues. The eerie stillness will forever stay eerie and still. Even in those cases, until now rather rare in Nielsen's oeuvre, where the human image can be glimpsed, such as some from the 2022 "*Scope*" series—and despite the figure being caught in motion—the feeling is of freeze-frame, a sort of perpetual pause. More commonly, in Nielsen's art, the "figure" is not a human being but a sculptural or even almost architectural construction of some sort, which dominates the field and threatens to demote (but doesn't quite succeed in reducing) the landscape to a mere background role. So imposing are these imaged constructions that—though she might not like hearing this—I can't help thinking of Nielsen as a sculptor as much as a painter, despite the fact that she has never (yet) exhibited a free-standing, three-dimensional work. Consider paintings such as *Quasar*, 2021, or *Zoled*, 2022, for instance, each with a central image of a spiraling steplike structure built (in the artist's studio) out of wooden planks—an ascending form that, in the case of *Zoled*, has a kind of extreme contrapposto, unstable and dynamic, while *Quasar*'s protagonist looks more like a tornado made of boards. Neither one resemble any sort of living being and yet they appear, somehow, animate. Printed in gray-scale tones and white, these constructions have a ghostly aspect despite their volumetric robustness, while the terrain and sky that surround it are painted in a surprisingly lyrical manner—the flickering brushstrokes used to represent the foreground grasses in both works speaks of an underlying wilderness that is foreign to the dominating form that imposes itself, while the deep space of the sky, particularly in *Quasar*, suggests a baleful, perhaps even apocalyptic drama brewing.

The human image in Nielsen's paintings is little more than a fading silhouette, an intangible shadow, while the things that people build take on an uncanny vitality and presence, and both have a disjointed connection with the place where they occur. Nielsen has spoken of her admiration for artists who broach "the question of the fragments, the counterforms, the collagist aspect and the hybridity. Their works are both strong and fragile, full of decisions and doubts."[11] She herself is one of those artists. In her work everything is strange, everything is familiar. We recognize our danger, but also our freedom. We glimpse the inhuman beauty of it all.

[11] Carollo, "Eva Nielsen."